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Uncle Chris spent his last two months working a filling station in a hillbilly town outside of Nashville, Tennessee. He had been dying of the big C for a while, but none of us knew it until we got a letter from a gal named Rebecca who owned the station where he drew his last breath and paycheck. She sent a note saying Uncle Chris hadn't wanted a ceremony, just his ashes dumped into the black woods, and we should make donations in his name to the GCCA instead of sending flowers. From the tone of the letter, you could guess gas wasn't the only thing Chris spent his last days pumping in Tennessee. The long red hair that fell out of the envelope with the letter was another dead giveaway. Chris always liked them red.

So, the entire Rodgers family came together at the farm in Beaumont, and we had a proper send-off. All the brothers, sisters, cousins and in-laws came from all over Texas to pay their last respects. We made a weekend out of it, with barbeque and beer, and the more sentimental Rodgers's cried enough tears to give the Rio Grande a run for its money.

Personally, I thought Uncle Chris had been rather selfish, denying us a proper ceremony. He should have had enough respect to come home one last time, at least to say goodbye. But that was Uncle Chris, literally dodging responsibility to the very end. Still, you weren't supposed to think such things at a man's memorial. So, I toasted his memory like a good nephew and did my best to keep the hamburgers hot and the beer cold.

There were some off-color stories told about the dearly departed, and one fight between Aunt Patti and Aunt Angela, but overall, it was a respectful blowout worthy of the Rodgers clan. Most of the family left on Sunday, needing to travel back to Houston, Austin, Port Arthur, or wherever their jobs were and by Monday the only ones left at the farm were Aunt Patti and her son, Cousin Al.

We spent the morning sitting around staring into our coffee mugs until Aunt Patti reared up and slammed her fist against the table and swore, "goddamn that little slut!" She was, of course, referring to the Rebecca gal who'd written the letter. As I said, from the tone you could tell there was more than an employee/employer relationship going on between the two, what with sentences like "He didn't want his family to see him in pain" and "he was full of life, up to the very end." Well, Aunt Patti must have picked up on it, even without knowing about the guilty red hair which Dad and I judiciously let float away in the breeze when it first fell from the envelope.

Aunt Patti pulled her own long red hair into a tight, painful looking bun and tied it with the rubber band from the Sunday paper while she cursed Rebecca and her witchy ways. By Patti's reasoning, Rebecca trapped Uncle Chris in some God-forsaken Tennessee shithole and kept him away from his family while he died slowly and painfully. She started crying again as she described him withering away, aching for one last look at the people he truly loved, but that big hunk of Tennessee Trash wouldn't let him leave. Mom went over and gave her a hug, and they left the room together. Dad and I exchanged looks then smiled over at Al who was still staring at his coffee with a blank expression on his face. He too had a lock of red hair that fell in a curl across his forehead. With the red hair, pale skin, and face full of freckles, he obviously did not fit in with the rest of us Rodgers's who were dark and dusty Texans by way of Italy.

Aunt Patti is my mom's sister. About twenty years ago she married some Greek from Louisiana and had Al. The Greek died shortly after Al was born and that freed Aunt Patti up for Uncle Chris (my father's brother) to hound. With the Greek gone, Uncle Chris started showing up at the yearly family reunions with a consistency that wasn't in his nature. At one reunion he made a lame excuse to take

Patti out for a tour of some local sights, and they stayed out the entire night, scandalizing mom and causing dad to whisper and laugh with his other brothers.

After that night Uncle Chris started staying at Aunt Patti's house in Corpus Christi during his frequent trips up and down the coast. Once he stayed with her long enough to fill out a change of address form with the post office. That lasted nearly two years then we started getting his junk mail at the farm again and we knew he was back on the road. He still spent a lot more time in Corpus than Beaumont when he was in Texas, but Uncle Chris had wandering bones, always looking for his fortune in some stupid scheme usually involving selling overpriced junk to working people who couldn't afford it and didn't need it anyway: Shark repellant life jackets to east coast fisherman, organic pesticides to Midwestern farmers, coats made from the same fabric as the astronauts' space suits; anything that wasn't practical. The closest he ever came to success was an organic misquote control treatment which caught the imagination of some of the wealthier neighborhoods in Houston. He sold out of that business when it looked like it might turn a profit, no doubt afraid of blowing his perfect track record of failed enterprises.

Through it all, Uncle Chris was the good natured, born loser you just had to love. When he was around, he was all laughs and hugs, able to disarm the most determined critic of his vagabond lifestyle with a lopsided grin and goofy story. The only one he hadn't been able to charm was my mother who thought it a disgrace the way he treated her sister. Dad figured Patti was a grown woman and came to the choice on her own. But mom would reply, yes, well, what about Al? What kind of example was Chris being for Al? Dad would counter with the observation that Al was born strange and will always be strange, and any scrap of normalcy the boy shall exhibit in the future will be solely due to Uncle Chris's influence, however uneven it might be.

Now, with the poor red-headed Al sitting across the table from us, lost in his coffee, neither Dad nor I had any words to comfort him. The link he had to us through Uncle Chris was gone, and he didn't really fit in. Sure, he was still our cousin and nephew through Mom's family, but that was not a true Rodgers connection. He would always be welcome at the farm, and anything he could ask, we would surely give, but you can't change a man's blood. Al had some long dead Greek guy's blood in him, and no matter how many times Chris had laid with Aunt Patti, that blood wouldn't change.

Dad muttered something about having to fix the car and stood to leave. I wanted to go too but Dad told me to stay and make more coffee, nodding his chin at Al as if to say, "Keep the boy company." I frowned and shook my head, I wasn't any kind of grievance counselor, but Dad gave me a hard look, and I knew I was stuck.

I hummed a country song while I scooped coffee into the filter. Al never looked up. I changed from country to rock, whistling a CCR song while the water boiled. I took the fresh pot to the table and poured myself another cup, then I leaned over to top off Al, but he hadn't even taken a sip yet, so I set the pot on the hot plate and grabbed the Sunday paper.

I was flipping through the sports page when Mom and Patti returned. Mom stood behind Al and put her hands on his shoulders. He looked up for the first time that morning and gave her a weak smile. Patti sat next to me and grabbed my hand. "John," she said, sniffling, "I want you to go with Al to Tennessee. I want you to meet this Rebecca gal and find out what kind of person she is."

"You can go because you don't have a job," Mom reminded me before I had a chance to think up an excuse, "and Al doesn't start school again for another week. Plus, it will give you two a chance to get

to know each other." If Al had any opinion of this plan, it didn't show on his face which was once again pointed at the black surface of his coffee. I looked at my own cup and saw my reflection in the liquid: a twenty-five-year-old, unemployed, roustabout with nothing better to do than waste some perfectly good summer days farting about the southeast with a college educated distant relative. But, as Mom said, I did not have a job, and since this was a constant point of contention between us, I knew better than to argue with her. I just nodded while Mom and Patti left to plan the trip. Al and I made quite a pair, sitting across from each other at the cheery breakfast nook, lost in our coffees.

Since neither of us had to worry about scheduling days off, we started out early on Tuesday morning. The plan was to get through Louisiana as fast as possible. As with any journey traveling east, getting through Louisiana is the worst part of the trip and should be done without delay. The experienced traveler knows this and will make a habit of stopping somewhere in Orange County to pee before crossing the border. With enough self-discipline to lay off the RC Cola and a strong bladder, it is possible to get through Louisiana without having to stop at all. This was the type of luck we were hoping for.

We had only been driving for a couple of hours and had just crossed the Louisiana/Texas border when there was a loud pop from the engine and the air started blowing hot through the AC vents. Al, who was driving, looked at me with an arched eyebrow. I shrugged. He pulled off to the side of the road and popped the hood. I half expected a great cloud of smoke to come billowing from the engine, but when we lifted the hood, nothing appeared to be wrong. We stood there with our hands on our hips, looking at the guts of the beast while I-10 traffic zoomed past, blowing hot air around us like we were in some trash filled Louisiana wind tunnel.

"See anything?" Al asked.

I shook my head. I was never keen on cars and Al was driving one of them foreign jobs. It was called Honda Civic. Apparently, it was a requirement for all college students to buy this car after graduation. Like a status symbol for those posed on the cusp of middle class. Not that I had any room to complain, it was a smoother ride than my '88 El Camino which couldn't have made it to Tennessee in a dream.

"Well, I don't know anything about cars anyway," Al finally confessed. "Let's just see if it'll still run."

I waited for a truck to pass then climbed back into the passenger's side. Al had fired up the car and the engine was humming along just fine so we traded shrugs and pulled back onto the highway. I noticed the air blowing from the vents was warm even though the AC was on. I closed the vent on my side and rolled down my window. Al turned off the fan. "I guess the AC blew out," he said, rolling down his window. A blast of hot air ripped through the car, and we lost a hamburger wrapper that caught the express current out of the window. I gathered the rest of the loose trash; fast food bags, receipts, and some college lined papers, and crammed it under my seat where it wouldn't fly away.

"Well, I guess it could be worse." Al said, squinting into sun rising over the horizon.

Five hours later we crossed the Louisiana/Mississippi border. Both of our shirts were soaked with sweat, and we were about as gritty and tired from driving with the windows down as a coalminer would have been from riding the shafts all day. Al pulled into a Mississippi Wal-Mart.

“Guess we can stop for a while,” he said. I had an urge to kiss the ground when I stepped out of that goddamn car. We entered the Wal-Mart and made a B-line for the washroom which was right behind the little cafeteria. On the way past I noticed they sold Icee’s. Finally, some good news.

I stood two urinals down from Al and we took care of business. I snuck a glance at Al who was twisting his neck around and sighing heavily. “Oh man,” he moaned, “that feels good.”

I don’t like guys who talk in the men’s room. I could make allowances for Al however because he was family and he had just driven through Louisiana with no AC without stopping. Nevertheless, I finished my business, washed my hands and left before he started singing American Pie or some such nonsense.

I was standing in front of the Icee machine, considering my options when Al came out, wiping his hands on his jeans. They had blue and red flavors. Red was a tried-and-true favorite, but I might be in the mood for blue. The sign said blue stood for Pena Colada, but that didn’t seem right somehow. I’d seen blue as either blueberry (awful) or bubblegum (not bad) but I’d never seen it as Pena Colada before. Come to think of it, I couldn’t recall for the life of me what Pena Colada tasted like. I motioned for Al to join me. Hell, ought to get something out of traveling with a college student.

“What’s Pena Colada taste like?” I asked.

“Coconutty, I guess,” he answered.

Red it is.

I got my Cherry Icee and a hamburger with fries while Al got the fish sandwich with a salad and iced tea. I’d never had the fish at Wal-Mart before, but it looked pretty good when Al was eating it. Thick and breaded, dipped in tartar sauce…

“That any good?” I asked.

“Try some,” Al tore off a piece, dipped it, and handed it to me. It wasn’t bad at all. It got me thinking I just might try eating healthier if it all tasted this good.

We finished eating and hit the aisles to refresh our supplies. Things would be easier now that we were through Louisiana. It was even possible to think of picking up a six pack of beer. If you get stopped in Louisiana with an open container and Texas plates, that was your ass. In Mississippi you maybe get a warning. I grabbed a two-dollar Styrofoam cooler, a bag of ice, a six pack of RC and another six of Stroh’s. Driving through Louisiana during the middle of a sunny September day with no AC had been hell. Mississippi owed me a smooth ride behind a cold beer.

Al insisted that he was still good to drive and got behind the wheel with no argument from me. I don’t much like driving on freeways.

I popped myself a Stroh’s and offered one to Al, but he pointed at the RC Cola. Must have read something about drinking and driving at that college of his. He took a good pull, settled his butt into the seat, and we were off. I tried getting my feet propped up on the dash, but the car was too small and my belly kind of got in the way. I took another gulp of beer and figured I should get around to doing something about that.

A couple of hours later we both had to stop. Something about drinking in a car, works hell on your bladder. The sun was setting when we pulled into a gas station outside of Tungston. The attendant was a scrawny looking specimen, long ostrich-like neck with a patchy shave job and greasy clothes made him look yokel, but he kept a nice store. He even sold the hard stuff behind the counter. A short of Jim Beam caught my eye. I didn't have enough money of my own, so I looked over at Al. He was checking the nutritional information on a bag of mixed nuts.

Ah, hell. I had four more Stroh's in the car, no need to get greedy. They did have a big ol' machine over by the Soda that sold something called Parrot Ice which looked like a super Icee. And it came in an assortment of flavors, at least four tanks with the colors visible, swirling inside like a rainbow waiting to happen. I read the instructions which suggest you mix and match the different flavors for a tasty treat.

"Hey Al," I called my cousin, "C'mere. What do you make of this?"

"Parrot Ice. It's pretty good."

"What's the best flavor?"

"Go with the fruit punch."

"What about mixing 'em?"

"Nah, just get the punch. Start mixing them and they just run together, can't make out any flavor at all."

Maybe there was something to this college thing, make a boy smart like that. Besides, fruit punch happened to be red, which was a tried-and-true favorite.

I put the Parrot Ice with Al's nuts and bottled water, and he paid for it all, which didn't bother me because I was doing him a favor by taking this trip anyway.

It was still hot in the car but getting better by the minute. With the sun disappearing on the horizon, I could feel the first tease of night air through the open windows. I leaned over, lifted my chin and closed my eyes. Mississippi smelled clean. Not like Beaumont. Certainly not like Louisiana. I sucked on the straw of my Parrot Ice and thought about Mississippi. It wasn't such a bad state, all things considered. And it had that river. And the delta where blues music came from.

"Do you remember…" Al started saying something then let the words peter out. I gave him a few seconds then turned back to the window. Mississippi wasn't any prettier than Texas. The air probably wasn't any better either. What had I been thinking?

"Do you remember…" Al started again. I looked at him and saw his throat working, like he was trying to swallow a peach pit. He was blinking fast too. Lord a'mighty, Al was going to cry! Which meant I would probably have to drive.

"Remember when Uncle Chris saved that pelican?" Al wiped his face with his sleeve.

"What pelican?" I braced myself for another Uncle Chris story.

“When we had that picnic at Galveston that one time. Corpus Christy. Jeff knew that lady who owned the house on the beach?”

“Okay…”

“Uncle Chris found the pelican caught in a silt fence.”

“Yeah?”

“He set it free.”

“Okay.”

“The thing was, that pelican fought him tooth and nail. Stupid bird thought Uncle Chris was trying to kill it.”

Well, how smart was a pelican that was going to get stuck in a silt fence anyway? I kept my mouth shut and reached for another beer. We drove silently until Al got himself under control. I had to hand it to him; he was a driving fool. Almost twelve hours with only two breaks. I looked at his profile in the fading daylight. You could see my mother’s family in him, Irish to a fault with his red hair and freckles on fish belly white skin. But he also had a very classic Greek profile, like you would see on one of those sculptures of famous philosophers. Except Al had a full head of red hair whereas I seem to recall all those old Greeks being bald or having weird halo hair. They were all queer too, from what I understand. I gave Al the benefit of the doubt on that one. Three beers and three hundred miles into Mississippi and the sun was almost gone. Al and I started trading yawns, gradually increasing in force, until Al swerved onto the shoulder and pulled the car back in a panic.

“Almost lost it there,” he said, checking the mirror.

“You want me to drive?” I offered even though I certainly didn’t feel like it. One thing I hate more than driving on interstates is driving at night. Just the thought of it made me reach for another beer from the cooler.

“Nah,” Al said, watching me pop the top and take a pull, “we should stop for the night. Keep your eyes open for a place.”

I nodded and belched, rolling my head to look out the window. It was full on night now and the vegetation by the side of the highway absorbed the light from the car’s headlamps. The darkness crept onto the road ahead of us, leaving only with great reluctance as we sped through. It was spooky out there. Who knew what strangeness lurked in the shadows of a Mississippi highway on a moonless night? I had an urge to roll up my window, but even though a slight shudder ripped through my body, I knew it wasn’t nearly cool enough to go without air. I took another sip of beer and rested my wind-blown eyes for a second.

When I opened them again, Al was pushing my shoulder telling me to wake up. We were parked in front of a cheap motel, a flashing neon sign reflecting off the roof of the car. The time on the dashboard clock read 11:36. I’d been sleeping for over two hours.

“Man, I guess I knocked out there for a while,” I yawned.

“Yeah,” Al agreed, “I already rented the room so we can just go in.”

I scooped up the cooler and my backpack and followed Al into the room. It was a dump, like every other interstate motel, but there were two beds and an AC blowing cold air. Shangri la. I grabbed the ice bucket and told Al I’d be right back.

The ice machine was in the main lobby on the other side of the parking lot. I strolled across the blacktop looking at the license plates of all the cars. I saw another Texas plate; it was on a dented-up Chevy truck. Typical, but it made me feel better. Like I had a friend here, another exhausted dude reclining on an uncomfortable mattress, drinking beer and watching late night TV until he just couldn’t keep his eyes open anymore.

I opened the door to the lobby and saw a sleepy-eyed lady standing in front of the ice machine. She was wearing an oversized T-shirt that hung down to mid-thigh and nothing else, not even shoes. She gave a startled look when I entered the room, but I immediately put her at ease with a pleasant smile and a nod of my head. Friendly guy, comin’ through.

She smiled back, pushing limp red hair out of her face as she continued filling her ice bucket. I looked at my shoes and waited. I didn’t want to stare at her, but through sneaking a few glances, I could tell she had a nice body under that shirt. And, although I couldn’t be certain because there was a stupid, oversized Mickey Mouse logo covering the front, I suspected she wasn’t wearing a bra.

The last few cubes of ice rattled into her bucket, and I stood away from the door to let her pass. She smiled demurely when I said “Goodnight” as she left. I watched her walk across the parking lot, stepping gingerly in bare feet. She pulled the back of her shirt down as it started riding up and I turned away.

I thought about it as I filled my bucket; a midnight run for ice? Dressed like she was? Oh, you know she’d been doing something wrong. She’d had red hair too… I wondered if that was some kind of omen. Maybe I should have told her I was looking for a red headed woman, given us something to talk about. Then maybe we could’ve found something better to do in this depressing motel than watch cable TV.

I chuckled to myself as I lifted the bucket from under the ice shoot. I could get arrested, the way my mind works sometimes.

The door had one of those automatic locks, so I knocked for Al to let me in. He had changed into long swimming trunks and a T-shirt, and after opening the door he went back to his bed, propped himself up on a pillow, and looked at the Tennessee map. I put the bucket in the sink and opened the cooler. There were two beers and four RCs floating in the icy water. I fished out the Stroh’s by the plastic gasket and held them up to Al.

“Two left,” I said.

He looked at me for a second, then nodded. I pulled them from the gasket and tossed one to Al. He caught it, but just barely, and had to slurp the foam away when he popped the top. I took the other one and collapsed on my bed.

“So,” I asked, “how much further?”

“It’s only a couple of hours from here. We should be there well before noon, depending on when we leave.”

I turned on the TV and flipped through all the channels once to get a feel for things. They had basic cable and HBO, but the movie starred Julia Roberts so it wouldn’t have any sex or violence. Worthless. I settled for an old Elvis movie on the local station. It was *Jailhouse Rock*, the only halfway decent movie the man ever made. I watched it for a while and had a thought.

“Are we going to be close to Graceland?” I asked Al who had settled into watching the movie.

“Yes.” Al answered. “Why?”

“No reason,” I said. It probably cost money to get in, and I had better things to do with my cash than keep those useless parasites rich off the man’s memory. Elvis was all right, but you could take Priscilla and that daughter of his and send them into outer space. That’s where they spent most of their time anyway, Jesus, marrying Michael Jackson? What the hell had that been about?

Elvis was doing the song now, dancing around the cells. You just must smile at that. I looked over at Al, but he wasn’t smiling. He was staring blankly at the screen, holding the beer against his chest. Again, I felt bad for the guy, but what could I say? Sorry that Uncle Chris shacked up with your mom, then died?

The Elvis movie ended, and they started a Charles Bronson flick that looked pretty good, but I fell asleep before James Coburn could match Charlie up with the “best” street fighter in New Orleans. It was an uncomfortable bed, and I woke up five hours later stiff, hungry and a little groggy from the beer. Al was already awake; what’s more, he’d already got breakfast. He was sitting in bed, working a plastic fork into a stack of pancakes, watching the TV with the volume low. I swung my feet over the side of the bed and rubbed the back of my head.

“I bought you some pancakes,” Al said, handing me a large Styrofoam container. I set it on the pillow and went to the bathroom, slapping my bare feet against the dusty tile floor. I took care of business and returned to the room, grabbing an RC cola from the ice bucket as I passed. I turned up the volume on the TV, watched the morning news and ate my breakfast while Al showered. When Al finished, I got in there to wash my face and brush up. I wasn’t going to waste a shower on another day in a car with no AC.

Not an hour had passed before we crossed the border into Tennessee. I kept fiddling with the radio to find some good country music, but I couldn’t find a goddamn thing that wasn’t “New Country” or “Hot Country Hits”. What’s the point of having Nashville in your lousy state if you can’t get Johnny Cash on the radio? I switched over to AM and found some old timey Bluegrass music that sounded like it was being played on a record player with a blunt needle, being transmitted over the airwaves by tin cans and strings. I sat back and enjoyed the hell out of it.

About an hour into Tennessee, Al took an exit off the freeway. “Won’t be long now,” he said. I reached back and took a strawberry cola and Baby Ruth from the cooler. I offered them to Al, but he shook his head. I noticed he was doing that thing with his throat again, and his eyes were tearing up. I turned the other way and looked out the window. We were headed into some thick woods. The road became a narrow two lane black-top with no shoulder but plenty of potholes. The only vehicles we passed were old and dirty pick-up trucks, the drivers of which glared at us for the intruders that we

were. I finished the Baby Ruth and started on a bag of mini–Famous Amos. I needed to munch something to take my mind off the fact that we were driving a Honda.

Two candy bars and a bag of honey roasted peanuts later we came upon a wretched little town called Bloom, which, from the main street, seemed to be nothing more than a series of connected trailer parks and a post office. It didn't take more than five minutes to get from one side of town to the other. On our way-out Al slowed the car almost to a stop as he passed a rundown gas station. Hanging over two old pumps was a rusty sign that simply said "GAS." Al stared hard as he crept forward, but there were no signs of life in the lobby. He turned his head and stepped on the gas.

That was it; the only gas station in Bloom, Tennessee, which must have been owned and operated by the Rebecca gal who we came to see. But Al didn't turn around. He just wiped his face with his forearm and kept driving. I grabbed another candy bar and let him have his moment. He drove until the blacktop turned to gravel then came skidding to a stop in the middle of the road.

"Hard to drive on gravel, coming right off pavement like that," I said, "Heck, hard to drive on gravel, period."

Al's knuckles were white on the steering wheel. The trees made a tunnel around us, and I was nervous being in the middle of the road. What if one of those shit-kicker trucks came by? They'd plow right through us if we didn't move.

"Al?" I leaned forward to get his attention. "Hey, Al? Let's go, huh?"

Al put the car in reverse and backed up to the pavement. Then he turned around and started driving back to Bloom.

"I knew he had cancer," Al said, his voice no more than a whisper. I looked in the back seat. The only snack left was a bag of red Twizzlers. I fucking hate Twizzlers.

"He told me he was dying," Al continued on the verge of tears. "Last year when he came to visit, he took me fishing and told me on the boat. He said a Houston doctor looked at him, and he had lung cancer, even though he hadn't smoked in ten years."

"Jesus," I said, thinking that was a rotten deal, having given up smoking and all.

"Yeah. Well. He was going to join that class action suit, you know, get some money out of it, but he couldn't stand the thought of being kept alive by machines and having his family moping around feeling sorry for him. So, he asked me if, when the time came, if I would help him…."

Oh, Uncle Chris, you stupid sonofabitch.

Al lost control, his whole body collapsed with a big, wet sob which sent the car swerving across the road. I grabbed the wheel and eased the little Honda to the right-hand side and put it in park while Al cried into his hands. He tried to apologize between sobs, but he couldn't get the words out. I tried to console him, patting his back and telling him it would be all right, but I'm not much for emotional outbursts. When a truck appeared on the road ahead, I moved back into my seat so the driver wouldn't get any funny ideas about us.

The truck driver waved as he passed and I waved back, letting him know we weren't in trouble, hoping he thought Al had just lost a contact or something. It took a while for Al to pull himself together, but when he did, he looked straight ahead and confessed; "I couldn't do it. He asked me if I would, and I said I couldn't. Then he left."

"Well, you know what," I tried to be comforting, "he had no right asking you to do anything like that in the first place."

"But he did!" Al turned to me, and I recoiled from his fierce red eyes, "He did have a right! We never told anybody, but he paid for my college. He wanted me to become a business major so we could open a corporation together. He said with my brains and his selling abilities, we could become millionaires."

Al looked out the window and sighed, a sound of pure exhaustion. I hadn't known Uncle Chris was paying for his college, but it didn't surprise me. Sounded like another one of his crazy schemes. I suppose I could have been upset that he never offered to pay for my school, but then I wasn't much on book learning anyway. Still, even without four years of college, I knew enough not to listen to anything Uncle Chris ever said. Poor Al, he must have skipped class that day.

The silence in the car became unsettling and I was getting antsy. "Listen, Al," I said, snapping him out of his funk, "You want me to drive back to the freeway?"

"No," Al swallowed and put the car in gear, "I'm okay. I'm okay now. I'm sorry I… I just needed to tell someone, that's all."

"Hey, don't worry about it."

"I feel like I let everybody down. Like if I had agreed to just… just *help* him. Or even if I told somebody… He would not have gone away. He would have been able to spend his last days with his family, like he wanted… He could have said goodbye to my mom."

"Al," I said, shaking my head, "you can't blame yourself. You know what? I'd bet Chris would have run away no matter what you said or did. That's the kind of guy he was. You should feel special, he even told you, shows he thought a lot about you.

"Hell," I continued, "if he'd have told my mom, he wouldn't have had a chance to run. She'd have helped him right then and there."

That got a chuckle out of Al, and he smiled for the first time in days. I reached in the back seat, grabbed the Twizzlers and a lemon lime soda, and handed them to Al. He thanked me as he peeled a strand of licorice from the block and put it in his mouth.

"Chris was a lot of fun," I concluded, "but he wasn't much for responsibility."

"Who is?" Al mumbled, still down on himself. I couldn't really say much as I hadn't exactly set any records in responsible living since graduating from high school. For the first time since hearing about his death, I had an unsettling feeling about Uncle Chris. I mean, at least he went places and did things. Wrong things, lots of the time, but he didn't just sit around the farm. I choked up a little thinking about that.

“I know who,” Al continued, talking mostly to himself, “Rebecca. She wasn’t afraid of responsibility. She did what had to be done.” Great. Al’s guilty, grief stricken, college educated mind was turning this white trash pump jockey into a merciful angel of death.

“You don’t know that,” I said, “it might have happened just like she said in the letter, ‘died peacefully in his sleep’”

“You don’t die peaceful from cancer,” he said, and I couldn’t argue. We drove back to the gas station on the edge of Bloom in silence. Al pulled up to one of the old pumps, a bell rang twice as the car wheels rolled over a rubber cord. A young man appeared in the store window; he scowled at the car before putting on a red baseball cap and making his way around the counter to help us.

Al took a breath and got out of the car. I did the same, stretching my arms across my chest and rolling my head. The young man never stopped scowling as he came to the car and asked, “He’p you?”

“Is Rebecca here?”

“I don’t know no Rebecca. You need gas or what?”

“Yes, please. Fill her up. I’m talking about the owner. Her name is Rebecca?”

“Owner? Mr. Scruthers owns the place. No Rebecca here.”

“Well, do you remember a Chris Rodgers who used to work here?”

“Mister, I just started here myself but two weeks ago. I don’t know anything ‘bout what yer askin’. You want I should check the oil?”

Al turned away and walked to the road with his hands in his pockets. I told the attendant not to bother with the oil and asked him where the bathroom was. He told me to go through the lobby, into the garage all the way to the back. There wasn’t much to the lobby, just a large barrel with coke and beer cans floating in icy water and a wire rack with Little Debbie snack cakes and chips. I passed all that up and went into the garage which was empty save for a motorcycle missing its back wheel. The smell of oil and gasoline turned my stomach, and I stepped lively to the back of the garage where a sign over a narrow hallway promised restrooms.

It wasn’t what you would call a clean restroom, but I’d been in worse. After I finished, I opened the hallway door and heard a short, terse laugh come from another room further down. The door was open, so I went to have a look. It was a makeshift office with a computer sitting on a folding table and a line of filing cabinets against the wall. Sitting at the computer was a red headed woman. She had a tired face with dark bags under her eyes and crow’s feet raking her temples. Her red hair hung loose and wild around her shoulders, contrasting against the clean white of her T-shirt. She was looking at the computer screen with a frustrated expression when I poked my head around the door.

She sat up straight when she saw me and flashed her crystal blue eyes. She may not have been a beautiful woman, but when those blue eyes hit you, you couldn’t help but catch a breath. “Can I help you?” she asked.

I noticed a poster on the wall. It was for an old movie, something I'd never seen before but the title was easy enough to remember. Big, bold words imposed over a burning mansion that spelled out "Rebecca."

"I'm, uh, looking for Mr. Scruthers?" I said, certain I sounded like the liar that I was.

She looked me over with a skeptical eye, finally saying with a note of caution, "I'm Mrs. Scruthers…."

"Sorry to bother you," I retreated quickly, jogging through the garage, out the lobby, to the car where Al was waiting. He paid the attendant, and we got in the car and drove away.

"There's got to be another gas station in Bloom," Al said, once again driving down the main street of that depressing hillbilly town. "Keep an eye out for it."

Al lost heart after turning down too many dead-end streets, seeing too many hostile stares, and having the car chased by too many packs of wild Bloom town dogs. He gave up trying to find the other gas station owned by the saintly Rebecca and pointed the car back towards Texas, much to my great relief.

We stopped for the night in Mississippi again; and after we'd watched all the cable TV we could stand, Al turned it off with a mighty yawn. We lay in the dark for a while then Al asked, "If I had cancer, and I asked you to help me die so I wouldn't suffer all the pain, would you do it?"

"Sure," I answered. "Goodnight, Al."

A minute passed in silence then Al laughed. It was a real, hearty laugh that sounded weird in the dark hotel room. "Goodnight, John," Al said when he finished laughing.